

Collisions: History, home and storytelling

Cultural Dynamics
2018, Vol. 30(1-2) 3–12
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DOI: 10.1177/0921374017751767
journals.sagepub.com/home/cdy

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Abstract

Home is a central and contested emotional, imagined and physical location that is meaningful for every person. Using personal narratives and scholarly essays, this special issue works through the negotiations of history and belonging with topics from sexuality, immigrant status, ethnicity, and religion to class. The volume features personal reflections by Évelyne Trouillot, Lisa Outar, and Isis Semaj-Hall and critical essays by April Shemak, Lyneise Williams, Belinda Deneen Wallace, and Tanya L. Shields. Each contributor considers the implications of complicated homes, identities, and geographies—particularly the Caribbean and US South—and provides new shadings on this always relevant issue by juxtaposing the personal and the academic.

Keywords

belonging, Caribbean, global south, haunting, history, home, identity, memory, storytelling

What is home—geography, emotional attachment, a material and psychic space, or an always-evolving process? These different conceptions of home continue to collide in comprehensive and personal ways. Months of collaboration with my colleague, professor of Dramatic Art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Kathy Perkins, on the Telling Our Stories of Home: Exploring and Celebrating Changing African and African Diaspora Communities (TOSH) conference revealed that home was a richly dense terrain. As I wrote in the TOSH program, “ideally, home is a place of belonging, legitimacy, and comfort. But home is fragile. For some, home is a war zone, a place of pain, and a space of un-belonging. Home can be fleeting, paradoxical and contingent on factors that range from sexuality to class, from color to gender, and from religion to history.”

Stories matter. Our personal stories matter. We learn from them and change from them. They provide connective tissue that allows us to explore questions of home in historical, political, and contemporary contexts. Stories serve as a mirror that can raise

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levels of consciousness and deepen public understanding of shared values, histories, and principles.¹ Exchanging stories helps us contextualize and participate in this web of relation.² Stories, regardless of genre, serve as a platform that enables us to refine our critical eye and, through them, interact, dialogue, and debate. As our homes change and nostalgia for an imagined past contaminate the geographies we traverse, our need for stories that engage and invite is most critical because they disrupt easy notions of a unitary past.

This special issue emerged from the TOSH conference which came to fruition after reading Heather A. Williams' innovative history, *Help Me to Find My People*. Williams used "Information Wanted" notices, that "were testimony to the fact that those missing people once existed and mattered."³ Locating loved ones through letters and "Information Wanted" or "Lost Friends" advertisements in African American newspapers was part of a quest for emancipated people. Letters sent to former masters during slavery were another means of finding family, while advertisements appeared after emancipation. Williams writes that the ads constructed "genealogies of separation" that dealt with the vagaries of slavery from the instability of names (enslaved people were routinely renamed with each new owner), the negotiation of white sensibilities before the Civil War, and the details, no matter how trivial, that haunted the seeker.⁴ "Information Wanted" notices were a mechanism formerly enslaved people used to seek relatives they had slim chances of finding:

Information is wanted of my mother, whom I left in Fauquier county, Va., in 1844, and I was sold in Richmond, Va., to Saml. Copeland. I formerly belonged to Robert Rogers. I am very anxious to hear from my mother, and any information in relation to her whereabouts will be very thankfully received. My mother's name was Betty, and was sold by Col. Briggs to James French.—Any information by letter, addressed to the Colored Tennessean, Box 1150, will be thankfully received. (Williams, 2012: 1)

This advertisement placed by Thornton Copeland 21 years after being separated from his mother attests to the emotional, geographic, and economic web embedded in finding family. These documents constitute an archive of longing in which enslaved people demonstrated their desire to build family within and outside the bounds of bondage. Ads were "remembrances that left traces for subsequent generations to find."⁵ As Josiah Young notes, "when ancestors are no longer remembered by name, they become dangerous, unpredictable spirits inhabiting the bush or forest."⁶

Williams emphasizes survival and hope in the face of uncertainty as she chronicles African Americans' quest to reunify their families after emancipation in the United States. At the core of her text are the complicated ways in which African Americans created a sense of belonging and rootedness during the course of a bloody civil war. Throughout the book, Williams demonstrates that the desire for family reunification shaped enslaved people's notion of home. Yet, place and ritual fostered connection when kinship ties could not, as with the story Williams tells about Winnie Martin. Martin's son, Sella, was sold away from her. Using a messenger, she sent blue beads wrapped in cotton as a dispatch to him: "I opened it, and found some blue glass beads—beads given to my mother by her mother as a keepsake when she died. I knew by that token that he was a messenger from my mother ... I had often heard her say that nothing would make her

part from these beads.”⁷ These material objects were a significant bridge between generations and the constant uncertainty of enslavement. Thanks to the beads, Sella finds his mother. Because blacks were denied home in all the traditional ways, they had to make home in unconventional ways. Maintaining kinship was the most obvious way; however, the thread that binds each family varied as much as the family structure—from songs to stories, to quilts, to beads.

Just as Martin’s beads tell a different kind of story about kinship and home, Williams’ notion of family as home might be read alongside the late Anthony E. Kaye’s (2009) book, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*, where he argues that the enslaved recognized the importance of storytelling to creating neighborhoods. Kaye writes that “[n]eighbors told each other ... about how they came to the neighborhood, and other tales about their past. They passed along rumors ... told sagas of struggles with owners and other powers that be, of their intimate relations, their children and other kinfolk.”⁸ Kaye recognized that these stories solidified connections, “pooled intelligence, synthesized and reformulated all the talk as common knowledge and common sense” (p. 41). Stories integrated newcomers and mapped a neighborhood’s “social contours,” both transforming space and cohering the lived experiences.

In addition, Michaeline Crichlow and Patricia Northover argue that creolization/post-creole addresses aspects of home not confined to the domesticity of space, but rather the domesticification of culture. They emphasize the way that enslaved people and their contemporary descendants fashion and refashion cultural practices, thus creating spaces of comfort that resonate or intersect with the range of notions of home that these essays engage. In other words:

Creolization was and is an emancipatory project tied to the imagining and making of modern Subjects. The making of place is thus fundamentally linked to the grounding of self, or complex Subjectivities, and vice versa. ... This relationship involves pastiche tactics, the deployment of elements of ready-made, drawing from the various fragmented histories and larger contexts in which modern people have been embedded. This is a view that seems to be entailed in Marx’s oft-quoted phrase that, “people make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, rather under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.” Thus in all these phases of geo-political expansionism, Caribbean sociocultural productions present themselves as strategies to accommodate as well as to alter, or resist, certain kinds of “ordering” or “differancing” by the governmentality technologies executed by institutions of governance, in pursuit of certain post Creole imaginations of modern-being in the world. (Crichlow and Northover, 2009: 19)

Similarly, the particulars of race, place, gender, and power manifest in “homing” or the desire for home in Jesmyn Ward’s 2013 memoir, *Men We Raped*. Ward engages with geography, demography, and architecture, as she recounts the deaths of five black men in 4 years, including that of her brother.⁹ The deeply wrenching work is honest, deceptively simple, and viscerally felt as Ward explains that:

It [the list of dead friends and relatives] is a brutal list, in its immediacy and its relentlessness, and it’s a list that silences people. It silenced me for a long time. To say that is difficult is an understatement; telling this story is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. But my ghosts were once

people, and I cannot forget that. I cannot forget that when I am walking the streets of DeLisle, [Mississippi] streets that seem even barer since Katrina.¹⁰

Ward indicates how the space of DeLisle, MS, southern poverty, and limited access to education created pressures that led to her brutal list. She confronts silences to bear witness to and for her community that rarely are explored through an affective lens. For Ward, remembering these spirits and finding the traces of others' stories are instruments for dealing with the complexities of the past—the dangers of those ghosts that can haunt us. Ward's list also insists that we recognize that ordinary people mattered. It means valuing their lives by sifting through the traces they left. Ward's work speaks of the collisions of history in a particular place with specific people in their natural and built environments and the ways in which these convergences layer identity, belonging, narrating, and making sense of home.

Ward's text unfolds in reverse with the most recent death to affect her beginning the book. Her memoir tumbles between past and present to its excruciating final chapters that, like the rest of her work, bring together the quotidian details of her community. These ordinary moments are enacted near lost Gulf Coast barrier islands originally formed by colliding tectonic plates. The layers in Ward's text reveal the architecture of rural poverty—the trailer home and the stilted shotgun house. The demographic shifts wrought by Native land capture, slavery, the Civil War, and the Vietnam War remake DeLisle from a landscape that is still imagined as solely black and white. Most recently, Vietnamese fishermen, refugees of a war in their country, resettled on the Gulf Coast because that geography most closely resembles their homeland. Demographic dislocations reshape the land captured from Native peoples, which was shaped by plantation economies and are now examples of contemporary exploitative relations. The US South is being remade and reckoning with its place in the global south. As Trefzer, Jackson, Mckee, and Dellinger articulate it:

While Mississippi undisputedly enjoys the privileges of the United States' First World status, swatches of abiding, grinding poverty continue to characterize a locale whose past reveals broad stripes of political disenfranchisement and state-sponsored violence that shape the contours of the present, a present in which power of all sorts—political, economic, and education—remains unevenly distributed.¹¹

These writers highlight the symbolic, historical, and condition-based nature of the global south by paying attention to spaces of extreme inequality in wealthy areas. First, the local and the global are entangled and collide with increasing frequency. These contemporary collisions reveal that home is always in flux due to the annexation of territories, changing technologies, and/or new bodies that come into a space and transform it. Second, the global in the local reveal historical, economic, and political layers. Third, like the Souths that Ward illuminates, the Caribbean is a similarly layered space. The extreme economic divide between rich and poor, native and tourist make known entrenched power relations. In addition to colonial legacies, recent environmental disasters in Barbuda, St. Martin, the US Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico highlight the merging of global south and global north geographies. These landscapes devastated by recent

hurricanes look like isles of the dead—emptied of people, flora, and fauna. Williams, Ward, and almost all the contributors to this volume speak in one way or another about how the dead animate the present—remembering them, telling their stories, and coming to terms with their legacies.

The recovery of the dead and their legacies might be better understood as a symbolic and temporary reinstatement of a type of knowledge and power that could not exist in the past. Such recovery while essential is a thorny issue because reclamation of home speaks to layered longings that run the gamut from misremembering to romanticizing home. Our cover image reflects the complexity located in longing. Taken from Michael C. Lam's photographic series "Oniabo," "Seaward Bowline" conjures my own archive of longing.¹² Lam, a Guyanese photographer and graphic artist of Portuguese and Chinese descent, works and lives in that country. His pictures of my homeland struck me with waves of longing. Like many in the series, this image is unpeopled, but the jhandi—or flags on bamboo poles—and the boat indicate human, specifically Hindu presence. The serenity of Lam's work belies the ethnic tensions in Guyana. The elemental photographs in "Oniabo" that highlight immense skies and open spaces remind me of drifting down the Demerara in a small boat in 1997. I felt insignificant and humbled by the vastness of the waters, trees, and sky around me, but I also felt imperiled in the tiny skiff. In black and white, "Seaward Bowline" conjures the remoteness, silence, and haunting that Guyana occupies in my heart and mind. This image transports me to the memories that trouble me from my childhood.

I have a memory of collecting from a neighbor's tree tube-like tamarind pods in my gingham school uniform skirt. I recently shared this recollection with my parents. The quizzical looks they gave me followed by "The neighbor didn't have a tamarind tree" disturbed me. This experience is vivid in my mind. We went back and forth and I believe out of pity, they tried to find a space where gathering tamarind could have happened. They thought that perhaps the tamarind incident could have taken place at my Indo-Guyanese godmother, Mama Aisha's house. No, it could not happen there. They traversed the landscape of their minds to support a memory I was so certain of, to no avail. A memory I held dear was a fiction or could not be remembered as fact. This was a lesson. Had I read about a girl collecting tamarind in a book? The stories we tell ourselves, the stories we invent to understand our relationship to home reveal what we long for and what we are haunted by. What does the tamarind tree tell me? Primarily, it indicates that my relationship with Guyana is a distant and nostalgic one. Spatial and temporal distance from my home saddens me because I no longer know the codes—from comportment to cuisine—of belonging there. I can no longer define home in those terms—food, behavior, or even memories. Yet my invented memories push me to understand the stark bitter and beautiful realities of the place.

The precarious nature of home is visible around the world. Global insecurity manifests in environmental catastrophe and people fleeing war and violence from Kenya to Syria to St. Martin and Puerto Rico. Terrorist attacks in Lebanon, Australia, France, Britain and the United States exacerbate the feeling that violence is inescapable. Furthermore, exorbitant housing costs, curtailed health, education, and voting rights in the United States imperil home for people in this country. All of these amplify a sense of "unbelonging" and "homelessness" that, in some societies, includes the lack of basic

material needs such as food and shelter, and in others, displacement is emotional and intellectual. The combination of white supremacy, misogyny, populism, celebrity cults, and a willful ignorance of global interconnectivities has turned Western democracies increasingly right-wing and authoritarian, with kakistocracies making visible the corruption and mismanagement that have been popularly identified as the condition of the developing world. Embedded in these turns is an increasingly aggressive and nationalist masculinity distorting politics around the world. The election of Donald Trump in the United States, the rise of white nationals in Europe, corrupt-prone Michel Temer in Brazil, murderous Rodrigo Duterte regime in the Philippines, and Boko Haram in Nigeria are just a few of the male-led cabals. The ascension of such openly crooked and misogynistic regimes is not new, but these unholy alliances imperil home for most people on this planet. Precarity is gendered, specifically feminized. Historically, laws and customs curtailed the participation of female-identified people in their nations. Developments in global economies that depend on women's unpaid and underpaid labor sustain many nations. Women disproportionately feel the effects of poverty that make home a challenge when combined with other issues that impact home—from failing economies, political instability, violence, lack of healthcare and education. Women's perspectives on home situate these disparities in layered ways that examine a range of forces and power relations. Women artists and activists, who came to TOSH to discuss the gendered nature of home, shared that women and children were the people most impacted by the policies of governments and aid agencies.

TOSH convened more than 20 participants from over 10 countries to share their personal, professional, and political stories of making home. In this volume, I assemble a sample of that diversity, and the writers here provide a rich assortment of perspectives, primarily about the Anglophone Caribbean, where narratives of home are told through personal reflection and scholarly engagement. This special issue consists of seven essays that speak of degrees of home and haunting, ranging from autobiographical, reflective pieces to traditional scholarly articles examining place, returning home, sexuality, global care chains, and specters of belonging. Archival lacunae motivate the production of several essays in this volume such as the first reflective essay by Évelyne Trouillot, "*Lakay se lakay*, but where is *lakay*?" (or "Home is home, but where is home") which articulates how home and dignity can be displaced. Trouillot is preoccupied by history and the policies generated in its wake. To this end, she uses the creative arts to confront historical dehumanization in her writing. Writing is fundamental to how Trouillot makes sense of the world. She uses the "Tree of Forgetfulness"¹³ as a totem for understanding the conflicts and contradictions of home for people forced to leave their countries. In addition to the ritual remembering that the tree invokes, Trouillot delves into many critical topics from the often white, but certainly Western humanitarian impulse, to motherhood, and to being without an official identity because one has no documents.

"The tenuous nature of [one's] public identity"¹⁴ as Heather Williams mentions in her history is part of April Shemak's analysis of one of Trouillot's novels. Shemak's piece, "Refugee Women and the Work of Care in Évelyne Trouillot's *Memory at Bay*," uses fiction to explore the intimate space of care work in the lives of Quisqueyan¹⁵ women living and working in France. This type of labor, dismissed because it has been naturalized as women's work, supports the character, Marie-Ange, and becomes the impetus

that forces her to confront the past. Marie-Ange pieces together fragments of the traumatized and haunted—the diaries and memories of her mother along with her own remembrances. Shemak explores the way that Trouillot’s novel suspends time and space and moves through each in a circular way by alternating narratives from the living and the dead. Using theories of trauma and memory, Shemak probes how the novel deals with the experiences of living under a dictatorship in the characters’ quest for home. Part of the answer seems to be in constructing archives that blend official and personal intergenerational stories. For Shemak, Trouillot’s fictional account reveals the shifting layers of labor, politics, and a woman’s place in a refugee context.

In Lyneise Williams’ “Boundless,” the story of Ellen Weaver’s care work is vividly encapsulated in the blue-eyed spiritual beings in protective doll-like containers that she crafted for her family. Ellen makes the reliquary figures with dirt from the family cemetery and with medicinal twigs and herbs from her work as a healer. The dirt from Edgefield, SC moves with the family to Georgia, New York, and Ohio, reiterating the Bakota belief that territory does not matter as much as the bones of a people’s dead. As Williams puts it, “Rather than fighting for territory the Bakota gathered the relics of their deceased and other items from their graves ... and moved to a different place.” Williams chronicles the dolls’ journey and their work as family protectors. She refers to them as “spirits in motion” that connect various family homes. She analyzes the multiple functions that the dolls embody, from figurative stereotypes deployed to protect black children in the Jim Crow south to spirit workers. Caring for the dolls becomes a ritual act that connects the generations. Williams herself is a guardian of these ancestral containers whose power to protect extends beyond history and geography.

Lisa Outar reflects on leaving and returning to her birthplace in “Touching the Shores of Home: Guyana, Indo-Caribbeanness, Feminism and Return.” Reminiscent of Lyneise Williams’ essay, Outar mentions the inability to tend graves when one leaves home. From two different locales and points of reference, graves become significant as a link to geography, architecture, and demography. Outar posits that the question of home is one of promises, possibilities, and hauntings “rooted ... in the concatenation of slavery, indentureship and the plantation complex.” These series of interconnections deeply characterize the collisions that mark our realities, from food, language, gender, and power relations to implicit meditations of the meaning and function of the transnational.

Many African diasporic spiritual practices, particularly those with spirit possession, accept same-gender-loving relationships to varying degrees. However, the ubiquity of US queer discourse and often-imported fundamentalist Christianity has meant some of the Caribbean’s indigenous practices and understandings have been supplanted, lost, and subsumed. “Trans” takes on a different meaning in “Queer Potentialities and Queering Home in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*” written by Belinda Deneen Wallace. The writer asks us to rethink how we understand and imagine queer Caribbean experiences of belonging. The essay includes Wallace’s reflections about the crossroads she straddles personally and professionally while conducting research on queer subjects and texts. Wallace shares the brutal, but true story of the Gully Queen, a transgender Caribbean woman beaten and killed, when the gender assigned to her at birth is revealed. Unlike the dolls in Williams’ “Boundless,” there is no one to protect or even claim the body of the Gully Queen. She is homeless. Wallace extends José Estaban Muñoz’s work

on utopia to argue that developing queer potentialities can be a way to negotiate Caribbean trans and nonbinary identities.

Negotiation in the Caribbean is not only part of the discourse on gender and identity but continues to be part of regional engagement with the past. In my essay, “Hell and Grace: Palimpsestic belonging in *The True History of Paradise* and *Crossing the Mangrove*,” I argue that such engagement happens in the texts I examine. Using the palimpsest as a guiding metaphor, I analyze Margaret Cezair-Thompson’s and Maryse Condé’s novels to revisit complicated and layered terrains of the past and the novelistic present. Haunting becomes a constituent part of palimpsest and highlights the historical dimension of Caribbean belonging in two distinct but overlapping geographies—Jamaica and Guadeloupe.

In “Constructing a Dub Identity: What It Means to Be ‘Back Home’ in Jamaica,” Isis Semaj-Hall uses the four production techniques of dub music (reverberation, mixing, talk over, and muting/mut(e)ation) to deal with “straddling multiple worlds [and] negotiating being ‘Back Home’.” She juxtaposes her repatriation with that of fictional characters from Caribbean literature, most notably Mona Singh in Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge*. Semaj-Hall argues that circular migrations encapsulate her dub identity. Her reflection, like others in this issue, grapples with history, politics, and the affective tug that is part of home’s web of relation. Her attempts to reconcile private actions with historical forces reveal the confrontations and implications of the many registers of home. This ongoing process is one amplified through sharing stories.

Sharing stories reminds us of other stories and creates a chain or web that reveals the ways we are connected and, just as often, the ways in which we differ. Home is a product of collision. Some of these opposing interactions are expected and benevolent, but many are unexpected and violent. The essays in the volume do not collide with each other as much as they overlap, and highlight the impact of identity, history, and geography. In bringing these subjects to our attention, these articles ask us to go intentionally into the breach to extend ourselves, to take an empathic journey to interrogate home and homing, which can help us pivot from the quest to find family to the search for our people in the broadest terms of belonging.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The Telling Our Stories of Home: Exploring and Celebrating Changing African and African Diaspora Communities (TOSH) project was awarded a Humanities in the Public Square grant by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to highlight the humanities in the wider world. While the views, findings, and recommendations expressed during the TOSH programs, and in this subsequent volume, are not those of the NEH, this grant allowed us to support programs such as the African Diaspora Teachers Fellowship Program, which trains public school teachers to incorporate the history, politics, and culture of Africa and its diaspora into their classrooms.

2. Web of relation, Édouard Glissant's theory of connection, is based on shared knowledge of the abyss, which is found with those who have common experiences. This web is a network of feelings laden with empathy and the implications of taking another's story into yourself and feeling it as your own (*Poetics of Relation*, Glissant, 2000 [1990]: 8).
3. Williams (2012: 194).
4. "For mothers...[who] could not shake the memories of children taken from them ... the haunting was not metaphorical. The actual memories, the pain, and the guilt would not fade" (Williams, 2012: 191).
5. Williams (2012: 191).
6. Young quoted in Hylton (2002: 164).
7. Williams (2012: 124).
8. Kaye (2009: 41).
9. Minnie Bruce Pratt's (1991) autobiographical essay, "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," uses geography, demography, and architecture as a structuring device to revisit personal, local, and national histories. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Biddy Martin describe it, "[The] narrative politicizes the geography, demography, and architectures of [Pratt's] communities ... by discovering local histories of exploitation and struggle. Pratt problematizes her ideas about herself by juxtaposing the assumed histories of her family and childhood...to the layers of exploitation...and struggles of different groups of people for whom these geographical sites were also home" (Mohanty and Martin, 2003: 89).
10. Ward (2013).
11. Trefzer et al. (2014).
12. See <http://www.themichaellamcollection.com/> (accessed 15 October 2016).
13. As reported in a BBC article by Sue Branford, "Once caught the slaves were forced to walk in chains, hundreds of miles to Ouidah. Once there, they were subjected to a brutal process of brainwashing. Taken down the slave route that I followed, they were made to walk around a supposedly magical tree called the Tree of Forgetfulness. Men had to go round it nine times, women and children seven. This experience, they were told, would make them forget everything - their names, their family, and the life they had once had." http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/5321484.stm September 7, 2006 (accessed 25 June 2017).
14. Williams (2012: 159).
15. As Haiti is called in the novel.

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